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The Second Stage of Operation Protective Edge: A Limited Ground Maneuver

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On the night of July 17, 2014, following its decision to advance Operation Protective Edge to a second stage, the Israeli government issued the order to launch a limited ground maneuver. The immediate goal is to neutralize the attack tunnels dug by Hamas along the border with Israel; in conjunction with this decision, the campaign is to continue until it attains the goals of “restoring calm for a long period of time and dealing a significant blow to Hamas and other terrorist organizations.” At this stage, the move involves action in a narrow strip (about 1 km wide) along the fence separating the Gaza Strip from Israel, combining efforts by infantry, armored corps, and combat engineering troops to identify and destroy the tunnels. A secondary goal is to engage with Hamas fighters in order to cause the organization losses. It appears that most of the limited goals of this stage have already been achieved: many tunnels have been found and are in the process of being destroyed. At this point, the Hamas force acts like a guerrilla force and uses hit and run tactics with the IDF. Nonetheless, dozens of Hamas fighters have been killed or injured and others have been apprehended; on the IDF side, there have been fewer casualties.

From the outset of the current round of hostilities and as a lesson from previous confrontations, the Israeli government defined limited goals for the campaign. The first was to attain a stable ceasefire that will last a long time and be achieved via Israel’s strengthened deterrence against Hamas. The assumption was that deterrence would be achieved by the combined effect of the interception of rockets launched at Israeli population centers and the successful foiling of Hamas terrorist attacks, thereby preventing significant losses and damage to Israel while at the same time taking a steep toll of Hamas and other terrorist organizations in terms of casualties and the destruction of infrastructures. The second goal was to deal a harsh blow to Hamas’ military capabilities, on the assumption that after the change in Egypt’s policy toward Hamas and the destruction of the tunnels along the Gaza-Sinai border, it would be hard for Hamas to rebuild its military strength for a long time. Israel tried to avoid a ground incursion out of concern that it would be mired anew in the Gaza Strip with the campaign easily going

awry, concern that closer contact would cause greater losses to the IDF, and concern about widespread harm to the Gazans uninvolved in the fighting. In order to stabilize a ceasefire, Israel was also willing to ensure more normal life in the Gaza Strip, through more regular openings of the border crossings and other improvements in terms of fishing and commercial traffic.

Achievement of this limited goal ran into trouble due to the interests of Egypt – the main mediator – to deny Hamas of any achievement. Hamas is disturbed that Egypt is the main mediator; it doubts President Sisi is an honest broker, and therefore looks for external guarantees for the implementation of the understandings, preferring Qatar and Turkey as mediators. By contrast, Israel is willing for Egypt only to act as mediator, and has succeeded in persuading the United States to adopt the same position. Therefore, Hamas rejected the Egyptian ceasefire initiative, which it saw as an attempt to weaken and humiliate it, and continued to launch rockets at Israel and attempt more impressive attacks, including infiltrating Israel through the attack tunnels; it prefers to conduct negotiations under fire in order to maximize its achievements in the conflict.

Hamas initiated the escalation out of a sense that given its own plight, namely, political isolation and financial bankruptcy, it has nothing to lose, and only by demonstrating its ability to inflict damage can it improve its position and standing in the Palestinian camp and vis-à-vis Egypt, Israel, and the Arab world. Since the start of the confrontation, Hamas has based its strategy on the assumption that collapsing its rule in the Gaza Strip is not an Israeli objective, given the concern that the alternative to Hamas would be chaos and greater freedom of operation for more radical elements and extremist jihadists. Hamas' leadership estimates that the chance of expanding its political and military successes will grow as long as the rocket fire continues until a ceasefire is reached. From its point of view, the only advantage Hamas has over Israel is patience and endurance. In this setting, Hamas chose to begin ceasefire talks by presenting sweeping demands: the release of West Bank detainees arrested during the search for the three Israeli teens kidnapped in June; the expansion of activity in the crossings between Gaza and Israel; the opening of the Rafah terminal between Gaza and Egypt; expansion of the fishing areas to 12 miles offshore; the construction of a seaport and airport in the Gaza Strip; the transfer of salaries to Hamas civil service workers, and more.

When it became clear to Israel that a ceasefire was beyond reach and that Hamas was adapting to IDF modes of attack, there seemed to be a standoff in the fighting. At that point, it became necessary to advance to a ground maneuver inside the Gaza Strip. Other than defining the objective as destroying the terrorist tunnels and preparing for the next step of significant expansion of the ground activity, Israel seeks to destabilize Hamas and make it realize it is vulnerable and can lose its remaining assets, and that therefore it

should prefer to accept the Egyptian ceasefire proposal and the understandings that will follow. The ground maneuver at this stage is not designed to occupy the whole Gaza Strip or a large part of it. The intention is to conduct a limited operation to make Hamas pay a high price without Israel's becoming trapped in a complicated deployment or extended stay in Gaza. Therefore, it seems that the move is meant to clear the security perimeter – the strip near the border – of attack tunnels and other threats, and lay the groundwork for a security zone, free of terrorist infrastructures and activities.

A successful ground maneuver in its current format has several advantages: 1) to a large extent, it neutralizes the tunnel threat; 2) it achieves control of an area – albeit limited to a depth of 3 km from the border – which is a card Israel can play in the negotiations over a ceasefire and subsequent settlement; 3) it allows Israel to prepare the area near the border for the period after the ceasefire goes into effect so that it will serve as a security zone, free of terrorist activity and with supervision of civilian activity. This will make it easier for Israel to prevent the construction of tunnels and will prevent terrorists from exploiting the close contact for attacks on forces operating near the fence; and 4) it enables shortened ranges for operations to penetrate deep into populated urban areas, especially the principal areas for mid and long range missiles launch sites.

At the same time, the IDF troops inside Gaza are more vulnerable to explosives-laden tunnels, mines, ambushes, and anti-tank fire, and therefore must assume that Hamas will direct its efforts against IDF troops while it continues the rocket fire, in an attempt to even out the losses. In these circumstances, it is necessary to take into account a scenario in which the current maneuver will not easily bring Hamas – and especially its more hawkish military wing – to its knees in the near future and prompt it to agree to an Egyptian-proposed ceasefire, even if it undergoes some cosmetic changes. Hamas may well persist in rocket launches, and its activity may continue to be based on the notion it has nothing to lose and that from Israel's perspective, there is no substitute for Hamas for ruling Gaza, because Israel prefers a stable entity that can impose its will – for good and for bad – on the Gaza Strip. This gives rise to two conclusions: one, for Hamas to understand that a ceasefire is preferable to it than continued fighting, its senior leaders and commanders must feel that the IDF is closing in on them, which means deepening the ground incursion into the urban areas in Gaza; two, Israel will ultimately not be able to avoid offering a benefits package limited to the civilian sector, with emphasis on expanding activity in the border crossings and opening the Rafah terminal (pending Egyptian agreement), that Hamas can, at the end of the fighting, present as its achievements.